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Author(s): Simon Gwyn Roberts

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# **Reportage in the lands of the 'semi-free': A comparative study of online political journalism in Georgia and Ukraine**

**Simon Gwyn Roberts, University of Chester, 2012**

## Abstract

Studies examining the democratizing potential of new media have tended towards a somewhat myopic anglocentrism, which has characterised much of the ensuing debate and therefore failed to fully predict the effects in other contexts and cultures. While the obviously deficient media environment of the Arab world attracted global attention *post* Arab Spring, and some attempts have been made to examine the impact in other overtly authoritarian regimes, this article argues that the most revealing dynamic is elsewhere: in 'west-facing' post-Soviet countries which embrace concepts of media freedom and democracy yet fail to fully implement them. In these media environments, sometimes described as 'semi free' (Robakidze, 2011), web access is often very high, partly driven by the failures of the mainstream independent press to capitalise on the post-Communist environment combined with recent limitations on the freedom of the press. Two countries on similar political trajectories, Ukraine and Georgia, are examined in this article. Both experienced so-called 'colour revolutions' in the early 2000s, with 'media freedom' a fundamental part of protestor's demands, yet the underpinning cultural context differs considerably. Through the use of immersive interviews with journalists in both countries, the article identifies the emergence of 'hub websites' specialising in independent political journalism, around which an engaged and politically active population is coalescing.

## Introduction: Online political journalism in context

The deficiencies of contemporary mainstream journalism generate political attention in many contexts and countries worldwide. Whilst it is inappropriate to over-generalise, the charges levelled against the industry have become familiar in numerous highly diverse media environments. Typically, complaints

in Europe and North America revolve around structural problems and resource issues which combine with a commercial disinclination to cover politics to contribute to a 'disconnect' between the processes of democracy and the voting public. In other contexts, the commercial disinclination to cover politics is sometimes replaced by rather more serious forms of direct or indirect censorship and other forms of control over the press.

Beckett (2008) argues that the long-running debate about the gulf between the democratic ideal and the prevailing reality is increasingly situated in the news media itself. In a climate in which the democratic function of the news media is increasingly called into question, a parallel growth in the scope and ambition of political blogs, politically-motivated social media and other forms of internet-enabled political communication is perhaps unsurprising, with several commentators arguing that the internet offers increased opportunities for enhanced democratic discourse. Predictions that the Internet will reinvigorate public debate and reconnect politicians to their public are not new, of course. Blumler and Coleman called for a 'civic commons in cyberspace' as early as 2001, and well before that new media environment's implications for political communication were being explored by academics.

Some of this early optimism about the potential of the Internet to reinvigorate the public sphere subsequently faded, with commentators challenging the more extravagant claims and arguing that new media's democratizing potential and impact on journalism had been exaggerated. Entrenched perspectives and polarized opinions characterised the debate for many years, which led Agre (2002) to point out that the internet has its effect only in the ways that it is appropriated, and it is appropriated in so many different ways that nobody has enough information to add them up. More recently, Beckett (2008) rued the tendency to look at the post-Internet journalism business from two extremes. One insists traditional journalism must be defended, the other is unrealistically evangelical about the potential of new media. As early as 2004, however, Gilmor rejected the polarised nature of this debate, which was often framed from the perspective of professional journalists expressing a fear of creeping amateurism. Instead, Gilmor argued there will be a mutually

beneficial move towards an era of media literacy and what he called 'news activism', whereby web technology allows people in various global contexts to regain control of the news. When people become more engaged with the events around them, particularly when they become journalistic activists, they become better citizens.

Gilmor's predictions now seem prescient: since the turn of the decade there have been numerous signs that the former polarity has dissolved into a more nuanced and arguably more realistic assessment of the significance of prevailing trends. A renewed optimism about the democratising potential of the web has crept back into public debate, with an acknowledgement that 'citizen journalism' can be harnessed by professional journalists to produce new forms of political debate. For Beckett (2010), for example, the British General Election of 2010 made it 'absolutely clear that networked journalism had arrived'. Coleman et al (2009) called for journalists to form a connection between citizens and 'the confusing mass of online as well as offline information sources', with the World Economic Forum's global council calling for journalism to reconstruct its relationship with the citizen and society, arguing that public engagement is transforming journalism and providing a 'historic opportunity to create unprecedented increased value'.

This renewed optimism seemed vindicated in early 2011, as developments in the Arab World brought many of these trends to global attention. The use of social media, political blogs and other forms of new media during the political unrest across the Arab World continues to be debated, with some arguing that online journalism facilitated protest and disseminated political information so effectively in Tunisia and Egypt that popular revolutions succeeded more rapidly than may otherwise have been the case. Whilst others doubted its efficacy and role in the political process, few would deny that the democratizing potential of web-based media and networked journalism had come of age in a context which perfectly demonstrated its possibilities in terms of circumventing prevailing deficiencies in the mainstream press: associated, as they were, with authoritarian regimes. In these 'deficient' media environments, typified by parts of the Arab world, online media gained traction

and impact in a way that is arguably impossible in the wider Anglosphere for commercial and structural reasons. In other words 'big media', in these contexts, is too dominant.

For this reason, it seems possible to assert that academic assessments of the democratizing potential of online journalism in its broadest sense have often been unhelpfully Anglocentric and pessimistic in their conclusions. Mason (2012), by contrast, argued that 2011 saw a revival of the essential appeal of the blogging format, and that the influence of that format was most clear in the Arab World, where the mainstream press have historically been subject to various degrees of censorship and self-censorship. For Mason, blogs exhibit a property that is vital 'in theatres of revolution', by providing 'somewhere to link to'. They have come to resemble, in contexts blighted by a deficient mainstream media, the British newspapers of the nineteenth century: journals of record. Those journals of record are frequently able to gain a wider, global audience in the right circumstances, as the events of the Arab Spring demonstrated. The influence of the media in general is particularly strong in countries where residents depend on a limited number of news sources, and weaker where there are multiple sources. Guy Berger (2009) argues that web technology means that a new form of global journalism is now possible, where local reporters' work is accessible online and the local becomes global.

#### Deficient media environments: The global context

What might be described as 'deficient' media environments, where journalistic ideals are far from realized, can be identified in very different and distinctive contexts. At one end of the scale are overtly authoritarian regimes like those of the pre-2011 Arab World. But at the other, deficiencies can often be identified in unexpected contexts. For example, in devolved entities across the EU, media portrayal of devolved politics is often compromised for structural and economic reasons. Wales, for instance, a devolved entity within the structures of the UK government, has been described as 'a media wasteland' (Davies, 2009) with no national newspaper press and an almost total dependence on London-based UK newspapers for political information.

Cushion et al (2009) argue that 'English-centric assumptions about national identity' increasingly characterize UK national newspapers post-devolution, leading to a democratic deficit in other parts of the UK, where the nature of devolved governments and the policies they pursue are neither understood nor scrutinized. Instead, independent political websites have begun to gain traction. Such sites transcend the blogging form, acting more like independent political news sites, and therefore become 'hubs' for engaged readers by deliberately addressing the structural and economic deficiencies in the mainstream (Roberts 2011).

This article argues that the emergence of dominant independent 'hub' websites characterizes contemporary online journalism in many different global contexts, but that this trend has remained relatively under-recognized by analysts who have either been overly preoccupied with the use of social media in authoritarian countries, or overly focused on the 'Anglosphere'. Away from these environments, increasingly influential 'hub' websites now dominate political debate in environments ranging from Wales (WalesHome) to Tunisia (Nawaat.org). Further, this article will go on to suggest that the most revealing context in terms of the democratizing potential of this kind of independent online journalism lies elsewhere, in that group of countries which arguably occupy a middle ground between overtly authoritarian and censorship-dominated media environments, and those where commercial and structural factors are the main constraint on informed political journalism. This third group is perhaps best represented by the more nuanced news media environment characteristic of parts of the former Soviet Union.

Several former Soviet states present an intriguing and potentially revealing paradox in their approach to media freedom, and there are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, many of the states which gained independence from the Soviet Union in the 1990s have smaller scale media environments than Russia and the 'Anglosphere', but also have reasonably high levels of Internet penetration. Secondly, several countries in the former Soviet Union have attempted to enshrine media freedom into their constitutions, often as an integral part of moves towards democratic systems of government. Finally,

those moves towards media freedom have frequently been compromised in many post-Soviet societies by regimes intent on reasserting some measure of control over the mainstream, traditional press. In this context, the democratizing potential of online journalism is most clear, and again finds its expression in the development and increasing influence of 'hub' websites covering political debate via independent journalism.

Hanitzsch et al (2011) identified a bloc of post-Communist countries (Bulgaria and Romania in their study) which they argued formed part of a large and distinctive group in terms of journalistic culture. They called this group 'peripheral western', relatively close to western journalism culture as generally practised in North America and Western Europe, but considerably removed from a third group of transitional democracies and developing countries which included China, Egypt and Russia. However, the deliberately limited, 'broad-brush' nature of this study, which sampled several countries within each broad journalistic culture, obscures some of the complexities of post-Communist development.

This article argues that some post-Soviet societies, like Ukraine and Georgia, currently sit somewhere between Hanitzsch et al's 'peripheral western' group exemplified by Bulgaria and Romania, and the transitional democracies group exemplified by Russia and China. Importantly, Hanitzsch et al found that journalists who have to manage in a political climate that is relatively hostile to press freedom and democracy exhibit smaller power distance: political factors are, in other words, particularly pertinent to journalists' perceptions of media roles. This positioning is significant for the political trajectories of Georgia and Ukraine, because Splichal and Sparks (1994) argued that after the collapse of socialist regimes in the 1980s and 90s, Eastern European countries were largely caught up in imitating West European practices in economy and politics. Countries like Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia all sought membership of the European Union and modelled their democratic structures and media systems accordingly. To an extent, this earlier experience illustrates the nature of the balancing act currently being undertaken further east in Georgia and Ukraine: both countries are 'West-facing', with an explicit political

intention to join the EU, yet simultaneously exhibiting a *realpolitik* tendency for political elites to attempt to manage the news media.

Georgia and Ukraine were among the 15 former Republics of the Soviet Union to begin a transition towards independence based on a market economy and some form of democracy in 1991. All these states have since experienced very different paces and trajectories of change. It could be argued, however, that both Ukraine and Georgia have experienced similar political trajectories since the break-up of the Soviet Union and are therefore ripe for comparative study. Both experienced so-called 'Colour Revolutions' in 2003 and 2004, with media freedom seen as one of the significant gains resulting from 2004's 'Orange Revolution' (Ukraine) and 2003's 'Rose Revolution' (Georgia). However, there has remained a tension between the need to reform the press (as 'media freedom' is intrinsically linked with democratic forms of government) and the desire to retain, or reinstate, some form of state control. The dynamic is intriguing and potentially reveals a wider truth about the democratizing potential of new media in what Robakidze (2011) describes as semi-free media environments: those which partially embrace media freedoms yet fail to fully implement them.

The descriptor 'Colour Revolutions' is generally taken to describe as a single phenomenon a number of non-violent protests that succeeded in overthrowing authoritarian regimes during the first half of the twenty-first century (O'Beachain, 2010). It has tended to encompass post-Communist countries, with Georgia and Ukraine the highest profile, though similar movements for change have been seen in various other contexts (although, as in the Arab World during 2011, protests have not always followed the peaceful model). All, however, can be summarised as attempts to challenge political elites through mass protest and civil society activism.

Georgia and Ukraine were arguably the most significant examples of the wave of post-Soviet 'Colour Revolutions' and were certainly the highest profile internationally, largely because, unlike some of the other examples, the political histories of both countries were changed by the protests. Since the



Colour Revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, both societies have been characterised by similar political trajectories, with an ongoing tension between democratizing, EU-facing elements and a still extant Soviet mentality within the body politic. While this political trajectory may be similar, however, it is far from identical, and the cultural and geopolitical context remains highly distinctive. As such, a comparative study has obvious potential for revealing important contextual differences in the development and democratising potential of online journalism.

To illustrate the long-term importance of these political trajectories in terms of the development of media and political freedoms, post-Soviet independent countries that did not experience colour revolutions have generally engaged in varied examples of containment strategies. In Russia, for example, the political elite appropriated the tactics of colour revolutions by establishing a pro-regime youth movement called Nashi. In Uzbekistan, a brutal repression of activists followed the Stalinist maxim: liquidate the person and you liquidate the problem (Fumagalli and Tordjman, 2010). Uzbekistan's President Karimov has publicly argued for what he calls 'eastern democracy', suggesting that western news values and independence of the mass media are not appropriate for countries where there is 'strong and enduring' respect for authority. In short, individual liberties and press freedom should not extend beyond what is required to achieve economic development and national security (Shafer and Freedman, 2003).

Similarly, during the 'Arab awakenings', the regimes in Syria, Bahrain and Libya adopted a hardline approach to contain the demands of the activists after revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt had succeeded in deposing authoritarian rulers. In media terms, these containment strategies express themselves in terms of a refusal to adopt standard practices associated with 'media freedom'. However, Mason (2012) is more 'globally' optimistic in his claims that what characterizes *all* the recent Arab uprisings is the power of the network to defeat elites, and that those networks are driven and facilitated by media technology.

The nature, role, philosophy and conception of journalism itself obviously varies considerably around the world, with comparative approaches therefore particularly revealing, although still relatively rare. Hanitzsch et al's (2011) comparative study of journalism cultures suggests that aspects of interventionism, objectivism and the separation of facts and opinion differ, sometimes quite considerably. In very general terms, the study found western journalists less supportive of the active promotion of particular values, ideas and social change, and more likely to adhere to universal ethical principles. However, even this tentative attempt at a comparative generalisation might be disputed by those familiar with the output of British tabloids, to take just one 'western' example. The study also found that journalists from non-western countries are generally more interventionist and more flexible in their ethical views, with the active promotion of values and ideas more common in developing societies and 'transitional contexts'.

The perceived sanctity of the 'Anglo-American' or Western model cannot easily be subsumed into a consideration of the democratizing potential of online journalism. Almost by definition, online forms of journalism are less insular and more open to the influences of other forms of journalism: these may be adapted to fit local circumstances or merged with practices imported from elsewhere. Indeed, Seib argued in 2002 for a form of 'global journalism' as an alternative to the Anglo-American model, which requires journalists to understand how the links between countries affect one another in terms of politics culture and economics. This global journalism requires an openness through which new information is absorbed and understood, unlike the Anglo-American liberal model which is characterized by a predetermined set of norms in which journalists seek to reconcile news narratives (Smith and McConville, 2011). Indeed, Fielden's 2012 comparative study of International Press Councils identified the challenges shared by regulators in an era marked by the blurring of boundaries between converging media platforms, between professional and 'citizen' journalists and between national and global publication. Such a model chimes with the multi-faceted and open approach adopted by the 'hub' websites beginning to shape political debate in Ukraine and Georgia.

### Defining terms: Journalism and democracy

This model may represent a tempting characterisation of the open online journalistic model emerging in environments like Georgia and Ukraine, but any discussion of the democratising potential of online journalism in deficient media environments must acknowledge the inevitable problems of definition: what standards of democratisation is the study measuring both existing and potential future political journalism *against*? This is a difficult issue, and one that is of particular relevance in the post-Soviet environment, yet it is frequently ignored in comparative studies. Louw (2010) outlines the empiricist understanding of the world which underpins the ideals of 'objective journalism' still frequently fetishized by liberal democracies. This suggests that a real objective news exists 'out there' in the real world independent of the news media, whose job it is to find and record it objectively. Further, journalists are expected to eliminate their own subjectivity by applying journalistic formulas. However, this model has long been disputed by those who argue that journalists frequently construct the news rather than reflect it. (Tuchman, 1978)

Stromback (2006) goes some way to addressing this issue, arguing that much literature discussing the impact of media and journalism on democracy is critical of its effects on 'democracy' but that it frequently fails to identify news standards by which the quality of news journalism might be evaluated. An empirical approach is required if this issue is to be addressed with any clarity, particularly in the context of post-Soviet countries like Georgia and Ukraine, emerging from decades of authoritarian control and attempting to negotiate a route through democratisation and associated conceptions of media freedom. Stromback (2006) argues that few models specify with sufficient clarity the model of democracy to be used in normative departure, and suggests that the question of proper news standards cannot be addressed in isolation from the question of different normative models of democracy. It is, he says, only by specifying what kind of democracy we are referring to when using the term, and by specifying its normative implications for media and journalism, that we

can fully understand how media and journalism affect democracy. It follows that it is not valid to claim journalism undermines or contributes to democracy per se. This is a particularly pertinent issue in the post-Soviet environments of Ukraine and Georgia, where constitutional definitions are 'young' and remain disputed following the Colour Revolutions and subsequent political upheavals and governmental change.

The relationship between democracy and journalism has been described as a social contract (Locke, 1966). There is, inevitably, a certain amount of idealism to such definitions, which suggest journalism requires democracy as it is the only form of government that respects freedom of speech, expression and information. By respecting these freedoms, democracy fulfils its part of the contract, but it also requires a system for the flow of information, to facilitate public discussion and perform a watchdog function (Habermas, 1989). For Stromback, defining precisely what this obligation means is problematic and almost inevitably controversial: what kind of information do the public need? On the one hand journalism is often criticized for its content and negative effects on some aspects of democracy. On the other, critics are often not clear about which democratic standard they are applying when they criticize the media. It is one thing to argue that the media contributes to political cynicism and lack of engagement, quite another to specify why and how this might harm democracy. The arguments of Franklin (1997) and McNair (2000) encapsulate this debate further. For Franklin, contemporary journalism (in the UK at least) increases cynicism and detachment while for McNair popular forms of journalism, like British tabloids, increase engagement and perform a useful democratic function despite the shortcomings of their style of reportage.

In this context, claims that there is a new confidence in mainstream journalism partly stimulated by engagement with online journalism and user-generated content are lent some clarity by the more recent views of Beckett (2010) and Mason (2012) which suggest a new kind of networked journalism is emerging where news media engages with audiences to tell stories in new ways, and that those stories are subsequently amplified by user engagement. In

emerging democracies like Georgia and Ukraine, the issue of defining standards of democracy is often clearer cut, partly because constitutional moves towards such definitions are more recent: indeed, clarifying the relationship between the news media and democracy was core to the Colour Revolutions of 2003 and 2004. Fielden's study (2012) argues that, however press regulation is developed, the interests of the public should lie at its heart.

For the purposes of this work, an attempt was made to assess interviewees' views on this key theme in particular, and all were initially prompted to discuss what they saw as the main barriers to journalism in their countries. Such considerations led to discussions about the democratizing potential of online journalism in both Ukraine and Georgia, and inevitably, progressed to a consideration of the wider democratic implications of such 'open' forms of journalism as those pursued by 'hub' websites. Public interest was referenced as the idealised 'yardstick' of journalistic function.

### Georgia: An overview

Both Georgia and Ukraine are multiparty democracies with a clear commitment to a free press, but both fail to fully achieve the idealistic aims of linking the two. Georgia gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, and experienced a series of political and economic crises throughout the 1990s. The Georgian state under its first President, Eduard Shevardnaze was weak, rather than overtly authoritarian or liberal (Companjen, 2010). However, despite widespread poverty and political failure, it was the closure of the independent TV station Rustavi 2 in 2001 that triggered the largest protests against the Shevardnaze regime (Companjen, 2010). Media issues were thus at the heart of the debate about Georgia's democratic progress from the beginning, and have remained a key issue characterising political debate in the country.

Post-Soviet civil society in Georgia was initially stimulated through foreign organisations like the Soros Foundation, in which NGOs became a serious force in Georgian society and still fund several of the independent news

websites cited by interviewees and discussed later in the article. The alliance of NGOs, reformist politicians and independent media formed a catalyst for the 'Rose Revolution' that followed the allegedly rigged elections of November 2003. For De Waal (2010: 193) the revolution of 2003 'briefly electrified the world', as a rare example of popular democracy in action and a compelling spectacle 'pulled off with Georgian flair'. It was also the first of the Colour Revolutions that later removed presidents in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. Events were highly improvised and spontaneous and derived very largely from the miscalculations of president Shevardnadze, despite Russian-led accusations that the revolutions were planned with US assistance (De Waal, 2010).

After the 'Rose Revolution', Robakidze (2011) says that 'everybody believed, but only for a while, that journalism should be serving truth and providing objective information to citizens'. Indeed, in 2004 Georgia adopted a new law 'on freedom of speech and expression' which enshrines various media freedom principles within the constitution. Implementation proved more of a problem, and gradually the government strengthened its grip on TV media in particular. Print media enjoys more freedom, but circulation is very low and its influence limited.

Authoritarian hints were present from the beginning of the Saakashvili regime. He stripped parliament of much of its powers and increased government control over TV stations as he turned Georgia from a semi-parliamentary republic into a strongly presidential one (Companjen, 2010). As early as 2004 a group of civil society activists chided the president for being intolerant of criticism and a Council of Europe report concluded the media was self-censoring and civil society weak. It could also be argued that the EU has been too cautious in Georgia, partly because it feels it should show a greater commitment to democracy and reform before increasing its engagement (De Waal, 2010)

The ideals behind the Rose Revolution were soon further compromised, with Robakidze (2011) arguing that much of the 'media freedom' touted by President Saakashvili was simply rhetoric designed to boost his association with US and EU. The post-Soviet media legacy has been problematic in

Georgia, with state interventions, unclear ownership – and perhaps most importantly difficult access to public information and broadcast licenses. Saakashvili initially successfully transformed the economy, targeting endemic corruption. Perhaps even more significantly, he travelled widely and courted the western media, winning positive profiles portraying Georgia as a democratic success story (De Waal 195).

With the exception of the Baltic States, Georgia remains perhaps the pre-eminent example of a pro-Western, post-Soviet State. However, Konstanyan and Tsertsvadze (2012) argue that, a decade after the Rose Revolution, Georgia is characterised by an overreliance on political personalities, as opposed to democratic institutions and 'the personality credited with leading Georgia to the path of democracy may end up undermining the very process he once started'. This, they argue, is largely because the authorities have not encouraged political pluralism and the major TV companies are controlled by the ruling party and 'clearly manipulated for political ends'. In this context, the 'relatively free' virtual space, including blogs and social networks, form an increasingly critical check on the ruling regime's power.

### Ukraine: An overview

Ukraine's Orange Revolution of 2004 was hailed by many within the country, and particularly in the West, as a decisive break with the past. The events generated a huge amount of international attention, and the prognosis was that the years of 'virtual democracy' had been left behind, replaced by an opportunity that would lead the country towards liberal democracy, prosperity and integration into the Euro-Atlantic alliances (Copsey, 2010). However, even at the time there was much scepticism, not least from a significant part of Ukrainian society, broadly located in the Russian-speaking east of the country, that did not support the aims of the Orange Revolution and claimed that the revolution was orchestrated by the US and EU. For Reid (1998) Ukraine exhibits a tenuous, equivocal sense of identity and this cultural and political East/West split remains crucial context behind much Ukrainian political debate.

Similarities with Georgia were discernible throughout the events of the Revolution and their aftermath, although those similarities were rarely highlighted internationally. Like Georgia, the protests revolved around dissatisfaction with post-Soviet democratic progress. And, like Georgia, Polese (2010) argues that the crucial factor in the Orange Revolution was the transformation of informal social networks into formalised civil society groups and NGOs that then mobilised popular support and public protest. So, whereas Ukraine has obvious similarities with Russia and Belarus in terms of its internal cultural identity and historical development, its recent political trajectory and in particular the role of the media and civil society in the run-up to the colour revolutions has clear parallels with Georgia.

The millions of protestors involved in the Orange Revolution were seeking transparency and improved living standards, and their demands were subsequently difficult for the newly incumbent politicians to meet. As with the Saakashvili regime in Georgia, the post-revolution presidency of Victor Yushchenko enjoyed only a brief honeymoon period. 'The weight of public expectations vested in the Yushchenko presidency in 2005 was so great that it is scant surprise that his administration proved a great disappointment. The Orange 'Revolution' essentially replaced one part of the Ukrainian post-Soviet elite with another.' (Copsey, 2010)

The election campaign of 2005, and many events in Ukrainian politics since then, are often interpreted in both the West and Russia in foreign policy terms: broadly, whether Ukraine leans towards Russia or EU/NATO. This is further characterised as an electoral, cultural and linguistic divide between a Russian-speaking East exemplified by industrial cities like Donetsk and Kharkov, and a Ukrainian-speaking, Europe-facing west exemplified by Lviv. In fact, however, many argue that this characterisation is unhelpfully reductive, and masks the fact that politics in Ukraine, as elsewhere, is generally concerned with more fundamental economic issues and often localised in tone.



By 2012, however, this characterisation was being pursued as vigorously as ever by the Western press, in the run-up to the European football championships jointly hosted by Ukraine and Poland. President Yanukovich's 'counterproductive' persecution of former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko (jailed by the Yanukovich regime in 2011) was repeatedly highlighted by the Western European press. The Economist (2012) argues that Yanukovich's approach to politics is increasingly similar to the autocratic Belarus leader Alyaksandr Lukashenka, and reflects the political culture of the Russian-speaking Donbass region around Donetsk, in eastern Ukraine, which provides him with his powerbase. It concedes, however, that the Ukrainian press remains 'vibrant', despite Yanukovich's 'bullying' of the media.

Both Ukraine and Georgia are classified as 'semi-free' by global media watchdog Freedom House. Indeed, the contextual similarities between the two countries is illustrated by Georgia's score of 55 and Ukraine's score of 56 in 2011 (for comparison: Iran 91, UK 19, US 17, Sweden 11). The scores are intended to reflect legal and political pressures on the media as well as economic factors constraining media freedom around the world. Ukraine in particular experienced a 'significant decline' in press freedom in 2010 and an international delegation of press freedom organisations expressed concerns about media and internet freedom in Ukraine in April 2012 (Freedom House, 2012).

## Method

The author travelled to Tbilisi (Georgia) in April 2011 and Kiev/Kharkov (Ukraine) in February 2012. The intention was to interview a representative group of journalists about these themes in order to undertake a comparative study of the two countries. Hanitzsch et al's large-scale comparative study of journalist's attitudes (2011) followed Hofstede (2001) by constructing 'matched samples' that allow for comparison across countries because of their similar compositions. The volume of material processed by Hanitzsch et al's large-scale study, and the number of countries involved in the comparison, necessitated such an approach. By contrast, this comparative

study was deliberately restricted to two countries and involved a series of immersive, semi-structured interviews with journalists: all of whom were active political (print) journalists, and all of whom had some knowledge and experience of online journalism within the context of the countries in question. This latter requirement was intended to render the sample group relatively coherent and meaningful in terms of perspective and policy. For the purposes of the study, journalists were further defined as those who had some level of editorial responsibility. Within these criteria, an attempt was made to be as inclusive as possible and participants were selected according to hierarchy and, subsequently, willingness to participate (editors were approached first, followed by deputies, followed by chief reporters).

A series of basic research tools were developed in advance of the interviews to ensure intercultural validity. The intention was to develop an outline conceptualisation of the fundamental issues addressing both the deficiencies of conventional journalism and the related potential for online journalism in order to formulate four simply worded, leading questions for discussion that could be meaningfully applied in both national contexts. The simple wording was deliberate and necessary for comparative purposes, and this semi-structured approach was intended, in particular, to allow *participants* to define the role of online media within their respective journalistic environments, rather than the researcher. The four questions were posed to all participants, with subsequent discussion adapted to fit the specificities of each country, particularly when exploring the significance of recent political developments (for instance, the 2011 arrest of former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko in Ukraine and the recent calls for autonomy among the Armenian minority in one region of Georgia). Ideally more immersive interviews would have been conducted, but time and resources prevented this. In Tbilisi, circumstances meant that five of the journalists were interviewed as a panel, alongside subsequent immersive interviews with three individual Georgian journalists. In Ukraine, all seven interviews were with individual journalists in separate locations.

With the exception of two journalists in Tbilisi, for whom I obtained the services of a translator, all those questioned spoke English. Clearly, this is not ideal as the sample immediately becomes artificially selective. However, the comparative nature of the study, in two distinctive linguistic environments, made it essential. Further, the web-based focus of the study tended to mean that those journalists approached to participate, in both Ukraine and Georgia, were young (all under 40, most under 30) and therefore far more likely to speak English than older journalists trained under the Soviet system (who tend to speak Russian as a second language: the tendency to use Russian as a lingua franca is diminishing in Georgia, hence the need for a comparative study to be conducted in English). The post-Soviet context is equally crucial: all those interviewed received journalistic training *after* the Soviet era.

Most of the participants in both Georgia and Ukraine requested anonymity, and while some allowed their full names to be quoted in the study, it was felt to be more prudent to anonymise all interviewees by using forenames only for identification purposes. This was made clear to all participants before the interviews began. One journalist in Ukraine requested full anonymity: this is made clear in the text.

The following research questions were posed to all participants in each country:

1. What are the barriers to conventional journalism?
2. What is the relationship between the online press, mainstream press and politics?
  - 2b. Are there any genuinely influential online political websites?
3. How are minorities covered in the media?
  - 3b. What role does online journalism have in the portrayal of minority linguistic and ethnic groups?

The intention was for the interviews to follow a logical discursive progression: Question (1) was intended to gain the participants perspectives on what they saw to be the deficiencies of the mainstream media in their respective

countries, followed by (2), an open question on the role and impact of online political journalism. A follow-up question on influential websites (2b) was asked only if the participant specifically mentioned a website after question two, and is absorbed into that section in the analysis below. Finally (3), the coverage of, and representation of minorities within each country was included as a 'litmus test' for many related issues of media freedom and democracy. Again, where relevant in the subsequent discussion this was expanded on in a further question (3b), which asked participants to consider the current and potential role of online journalism in the representation and coverage of minority ethnic and linguistic communities. Ahmed (2012) argues that the inability of countries to either incorporate minority groups into a liberal and tolerant society or resolve what he calls the 'centre versus periphery' conflict is emblematic of a systemic failure of the modern state.

Evidence from sociological research suggests that the processes involved in interpreting a question and formulating an answer are complex. For example, if the researcher re-words questions, responses from participants tend to change. If the interviewer provides even slightly amended response options then people will give different answers (Clarke and Schober, 1992). This is an inevitable result of human interaction, although attempts can be made to standardise the process as much as possible and therefore minimise possible bias or variation between the groups, and individual participants. The author made an attempt to standardise the three leading questions, as the immersive nature of individual interviews allowed for this, in order to avoid potential sources of bias that inevitably arise when questions are reworded. This was particularly important in terms of the validity of this study: as questions were posed to individual journalists in two very different cultural environments. Instead, discussion was allowed to progress after the standardised leading questions with a small amount of country-specific prompting from the author. However, this does not, of course, lead to standardisation of 'meaning' from the perspective of the participants. Instead, understanding is often affected by a range of social and cultural factors, and this is clearly particularly relevant when conducting a comparative study in two countries. As previously stated,

the author attempted to overcome some of these issues by ensuring that all participants were drawn from similar journalistic backgrounds.

However, undertaking work that assesses the real impact of online political journalism is unavoidably problematic when working as an individual researcher. Focusing on a single theme and striving for a level of social coherence among the groups helps, but ultimately the validity of studies such as this is inevitably compromised by scale. That said, it is also apparent that immersive interviews lend themselves to more natural conversation and thus produce some interesting, often revealing responses. While inferences and real meaning in this context remain problematic for the researcher, individual interviews allow for in-depth probing and exploration of the meaning the respondent intends to convey with their reply, a crucial part of the interviewing process (Suchman and Jordan, 1992). The author attempted to engage in some prompting of this sort, as this interactional technique to clarify meaning is almost unavoidable during human contact, with the process intended to mimic the process of natural conversation where attempts are usually made to establish the speakers real intended meaning, or check that their own message has been properly understood. The issue of meaning is obviously central to understanding subjective views like this, hence the vital importance of assessing interviewees understanding of questions. However, too much prompting would have been inappropriate given the scale and scope of the focus groups. This unobtrusive, relatively minimal approach to prompting was intended to avoid altering the interview dynamic and meant that much of the exploration of the meaning of the responses was conducted during analysis of the data rather than in collaboration with the interviewees.

A degree of prompting is inevitable, however, and can be further rationalised by the fact that participants sometimes have to make suppositions to answer questions. Evidence from cognitive research suggests that many people will respond even if they do not understand the question (Clarke and Schober, 1992), and therefore inconsistencies in response should alert the interviewer to comprehension problems. One of the obvious further weaknesses with this kind of research, first highlighted by the work of Morley (1980), is the reliance

on what respondents *choose* to disclose, and, crucially for this study, what they are able to articulate about the democratizing potential of online journalism. There is also evidence that people strive to be consistent when they answer questions and might choose logically consistent responses even if this does not reflect their views (Clarke and Schober, 1992).

### Evidential chapter: Interviews

#### **1: What are the barriers to conventional journalism?**

All interviewees in both countries were initially asked an open-ended question about what they see as the main barriers to conventional, mainstream journalism in their respective countries. There was a notable degree of commonality in the immediate responses, with the majority of interviewees focusing on financial constraints, together with issues of objectivity which revolved around what most (but not all) participants described as ‘self-censorship’. The Georgian respondents also stressed criticisms of recent government actions towards the news media, emphasising what they saw as the damage caused by political developments. Responses are merged in order to provide a more meaningful comparison between the two countries.

Nino R, Georgia: ‘Together with the problem of public information accessibility, the independent press and online media outlets are facing a serious financial crisis in Georgia...that’s the first thing we should say. The most obvious effect of this is that media organisations trying to provide the public with balanced news are often less attractive for advertisers...who generally steer clear of advertising in the kind of online or print publications that publish investigative articles or offer readers, er, what we might call *critical* analysis of government reforms.’

Katerina, Georgia: ‘Things have got a bit worse recently, but actually, the...signs were there quite early. Changes happened quickly after the Rose Revolution, you know. Just a month after Saakashvili came to power, popular TV stations shut down one after another. The Georgian media just has not

been able to play the role expected of it since the Rose Revolution. The best journalists obviously refuse to simply transmit official statements, so they tend to work in the independent media. But this means their work gets a small audience.'

Broadcast information is often misleading, unbalanced and partisan in Georgia, with the 2011 Media Sustainability Index report noting that 'Political bias often comes not in the form of Western-style, value-based leanings, but rather outright propaganda and counter-propaganda'. This is despite guarantees for free speech being enshrined in the Georgian constitution immediately after the Rose Revolution in 2004, which provides clear principles to safeguard against the abuse of restrictions on freedom of speech (Yerevan Press Club, 2012).

Nino M, Georgia: 'It's true enough to say that media legislation in Georgia often seems near-perfect, certainly surprisingly liberal. But media company owners will tell you it all helps the government to implement, um, what we might call...indirect but obvious pressure on journalists. There is almost no transparency in terms of media ownership and this is a huge problem. Georgians don't know who is delivering the news to them.'

Salome, Georgia: 'Rustavi 2 [TV Channel] really just represents the Saakashvili government, with Imedi TV a bit more independent. Saakashvili knows the power of the media, he keeps an eye on the media, there's no question....'

Direct censorship has been alleged, and there are also concerns about the representation of minority linguistic and ethnic groups. The media, and NGOs in general, have become particular targets for the Saakashvili regime: "The sometimes course methods to accomplish reforms, the weak opposition in parliament, and the identification of president Saakashvili with an enlightened autocratic leaders such as Kemel Ataturk justify the paradoxical expression that under Shevardnaze, Georgia was a hybrid democracy without democrats,

whereas under Saakashvili, Georgia was led by a democratic ideal of image, without being a democracy” (Companjen, 2010: 27).

The Ukrainian response to the question was notably similar, but some participants took the opportunity to relate media deficiency with wider cultural changes in the country.

Vitaly, Ukraine: ‘Soviet people, if we can call them that, had a culture of reading newspapers, and indeed reading generally. In fact the entire education system, was, I would say, built around people reading papers and books. That culture of reading through traditional media is vanishing. This is partly explained, in my view, by the lack of colour. I, er...think I mean that in two ways. Newspapers in Ukraine are dull, they cover dull topics, and they are literally dull...I mean, they’re in black and white! Magazines, of the gossip variety, yellow journalism, whatever you want to call it, expanded in the last decade because they were in colour. For lots of people, worrying numbers of people, they have replaced news, politics, discussion. You know, only one or two newspapers are now seen in Kiev – and what’s very worrying is that there’s a big middle to lower income older audience that lacks web access.”

Participants in both countries referred to self-censorship as a major, and continuing problem, although the Ukrainian journalists were more likely to stress the issue than those in Georgia.

Tetyana, Ukraine: ‘There is self censorship, certainly, we censor ourselves... as journalists, I mean, we censor ourselves. How will what I write be received? It’s not like the days of Kuchma with direct censorship but rather, still, a question of self censorship. Let me be clear: self-censorship has definitely gone up since Yanukovych [came to power]. After the orange revolution, there was a feeling of freedom, but now this form of censorship has returned. It’s not the same as before the orange revolution but it’s definitely increasing. ‘

One of the interviewees in Kiev took a particularly negative view of the



country's journalism and political system: this participant requested full anonymity. Again, he responded to the first question by mentioning self-censorship, but immediately introduced a different take on the issue.

M, Ukraine: 'You hear a lot of political activists and independent-minded journalists talking about the problems of self censorship but, look, in my view self censorship is too soft a term for what goes on here. They do this, censor themselves, because otherwise they'd be fired. It's that simple. I was speaking to a local journalist in Kiev recently who said that everyone, or all the troublemakers at least, have been fired on his paper.'

'I'll give you an example of what I mean by this. On my paper we tried to run a particular story that got us into trouble, but the journalists on other papers I spoke to just couldn't understand it. They said: why didn't you just pull the story? They just didn't get it. People still want state jobs here – it's the biggest evidence the system just isn't working. Ukrainian journalists come to our paper and say "I can't imagine writing this without being fired". Journalists don't know how to be journalists here, they don't know what a good lead is, they often can't write.'

In the media sphere in many post-communist contexts, the so-called Anglo-American model of journalism has been widely accepted as a norm of professional attitude and quality journalism, even though it is in part a myth (e.g. Hallin and Mancini, 2004), and even though concepts of journalistic performance are strongly influenced by journalistic traditions in different countries (Jakubowicz, 2001). The views of 'M' above, chime with this latter viewpoint, with his suggestion that mainstream media deficiencies are systemic and cultural, rather than merely structural or economic, in their origin.

Over a decade ago, Splichal (2001) argued that although the media in post-socialist states have made significant gains in terms of liberalisation and pluralisation, they 'remain vulnerable to manipulation by political forces and, in addition, became dependent on commercial corporations'. While countries like

Bulgaria and Romania have made considerable progress in this respect, partially necessitated by membership of the EU, the post-Soviet journalistic environment in the former USSR remains compromised by older traditions echoing Soviet practices.

M, Ukraine: 'If you wanted to launch a successful newspapers in Ukraine it would be easy – you'd write about corruption, politicians taking bribes, you know...all that stuff. No politicians have a real vision for the country, they all just want power, and that's the explanation for what I see as the false east-west split conjured up by politicians and the press [this refers to the cultural 'divide' between Russian-speaking Eastern Ukraine and Ukrainian-speaking, Europe-facing West, and is covered in more depth in section 3]. There's no positive vision for the country, in other words.'

'Look, the east-west split is not a problem. What people want is to see people attacking the corrupt but you won't see that in any newspaper because nobody would fund it. *Ukrainska Pravda* is the one paper to do this. It's only online, and it has Danish sponsors I think. These guys are very good, they do proper investigative journalism, you know what I mean. Part of the problem is that there is zero trust of newspapers. Mainstream journalism here is used to taking money for articles. Proper journalism is not mainstream, it's niche, it's online."

Notably, this participant independently raised the online 'solution' to deficiencies in the mainstream, without prompting by the author and before the question that was intended to address the issue specifically. Other Ukrainian participants held similar, though somewhat less critical, views on the issue of mainstream journalistic deficiencies.

Tetyana, Ukraine: "With Yanukovich [Victor Yanukovich, President since narrowly defeating Tymoshenko in January 2010] all the good progress seemed to go back the other way. If you do an interview, er, you have to send the article over for inspection, and people...journalists, do this naturally. Also, I should say, the systems of paper distribution are terrible"

Ukraine and Georgia both profess allegiance to 'western' concepts of free press as it relates to democracy, and both have EU membership as a long-term policy objective. However, in all three there are tensions with regard to control of the mainstream press. Notably, incidents of censorship and other forms of state control over the news media have increased sharply since the events of the 'Arab Spring'. Indeed, the idealistic elements of the Arab Spring were echoed by opposition protests in both countries during 2011. These protests were relatively small scale and generated little global news coverage but many had significant consequences. In Georgia, for example, protests in 2011 relating to media freedom and other issues resulted in the arrests and imprisonment of numerous high profile journalists (this claim was related independently by three of the Georgian interviewees).

Vitaly, Ukraine: "People who are emotionally driven are willing to spend extra time working on stories about politics – this is precisely the reason that independent websites like *Ukrainska Pravda* are thriving, along with some notable blogs. Fewer professional journalists see their, ah, working place as a space for creativity because they're limited by low salaries and what I would call forms of, well, censorship. Political censorship is often mixed up with editorial policy that derives from owners who are often politicians interested in media assets. This is not necessarily the same as direct censorship. I'll give you the example of Sevodnya, which is controlled by a Donetsk tycoon, who, er, fired the editor after he carried a...controversial story and appointed a new manager who was, erm, loyal to the government but a failure professionally. This was a scandal! Its complicated: on the one hand there's growing censorship as shown by this case, on the other hand editors try to follow their investors and not harm their interests."

Other participants cited more fundamental structural problems, suggesting that the future of the mainstream press was fatally compromised by a combination of technology, global recession, and, perhaps more importantly, a widespread lack of trust in the media. Maksym chose to illustrate this with the same example of malpractice.

Maksym, Ukraine: 'Print journalism is dying very fast in Ukraine. Two years ago I would see a lot of people reading newspapers, on the metro, on buses, but two weeks ago I realised I hadn't seen anyone reading a paper for months. Hundreds of small papers in Ukraine are supported by local authorities, and they are struggling with funds. The 2008 recession more or less destroyed the print business in Ukraine. Also, people just don't believe newspapers – the level of journalism...the, erm...quality, is low. The popular sites cover everything but they do it in a tabloid style. Here's an example from Sevodnya, owned by the richest man in Ukraine. A journalist wrote an article about the president's house...soon after that article they had problems and, erm, the editor was fired. So now they avoid news about politicians.'

**2. What is the relationship between the online press, mainstream press and politics?** A follow-up question, which asked interviewees to name particularly influential websites, was also posed where relevant, and absorbed in the results and analysis below:

**2b. Are there any genuinely influential online political websites?**

The follow-up question was intended to draw out participants' views on what they saw as particularly influential political websites, although some had already raised the issue by referring (in both countries) to one particularly influential independent site. Clearly, the subtext – not directly articulated by the interviewer – was linked to the first question about barriers to conventional journalism in Georgia and Ukraine. Could any of these websites offer a 'solution' to the mainstream deficiencies outlined above? The responses to this question were perhaps the most notable, in the sense that every participant highlighted the existence of an independent 'hub' news website seen as most influential. Every Ukrainian journalist, without exception, mentioned *Ukrainska Pravda* as the most notable online journal and several participants cited the website as the *only* exception to the rather dismal picture of Ukrainian journalism outlined in the first section above. Similarly, every Georgian journalist independently mentioned the *Netgazeti* website, again highlighting its independent, trusted status (*Liberali*, a similar Georgian

site, was also frequently cited). This response related to the overarching second question about the relationship between online journalism and the mainstream press, although most participants began by outlining access issues in the context of online journalism. The Georgians were slightly more likely to stress future potential rather than current activity.

Nino R, Georgia: "This coming year will be very important, I think, in terms of increasing online readership. Until last year there was a big war between rival internet providers [in Georgia] and now that war has been, ah...handled by the government and now all are aiming at the regions and spreading out from just covering Tbilisi. We were working on a story about this recently, and we found out that all the regions will be covered by the end of this year and it, it...won't be as expensive as it was a year or two ago so it will, you know, probably very soon become a serious alternative to many other kinds of news."

Many former Soviet countries have shown signs of using new media technologies as a 'solution' to the problems inherent in their existing mainstream news media environments. These trends are arguably clearest in 'west-facing' post-Soviet environments like Ukraine and Georgia, but Hanitzsch (2011) et al argue that the values of objectivity and impartiality have spread away from the 'global north' in more general terms, and that there are now often great similarities in role conceptions among journalists globally, although considerable differences in journalistic practices remain. This, they say, is especially true for the perceived importance of analysis, partisanship, entertainment and critical attitude towards the powerful. In both countries, responses suggested that this change in 'role conception' was expressing itself most clearly online. In other words conventional media, newspapers in particular, were regarded by the participants as irrelevant and hopelessly dated, with a dwindling readership.

Nana, Georgia: 'It's true that there's quite a bit of optimism around about the potential of web journalism in Georgia but I should also add that one of the big

problems is low levels of access in the 'regions' [areas outside Tbilisi]. At the moment it is only around 13-14%. This will go up this year, for sure."

In Ukraine, there is also a significant rural/urban split, with often very high levels of web access in Kiev. However, Ukraine's geography means that it has highly significant provincial cities like Donetsk, Kharkov and Lviv, which all enjoy similarly high levels of web access. There is no equivalent to this in Georgia, which is dominated culturally and politically by Tbilisi, and has no large provincial cities.

Maksym, Ukraine: 'There's no doubt that we have high levels of web access in Ukraine, around 50% in cities, maybe up to 60% in Kiev. A site like *Ukrainska Pravda* gets 200,000 daily visitors, which sounds impressive until you realise it's maybe 1.5% of the entire Ukrainian web audience, so it's not popular to use the web as a source of news'.

Nino, Georgia: 'Websites like *Liberali* and *Netgazeti* make a real attempt to provide balanced news. They're not popular with advertisers, and that's a real problem because they have to rely on meagre grants from NGOs. It's only a small number of Georgians who are using the internet to view political information so this is not going to be big business.'

However, limited access is only a partial indicator of political influence. Indeed, the work of Megenta (2011) and Geniets (2011) suggests that the impact of the web should not be predicted by the number of people who use it. In contexts where online media remains the preserve of the educated middle class this can allow for the development of democratic social practices and information discourse online by reducing government control of information and enhancing political participation. Megenta (2011) explores the ways that online participatory media is chipping away at the power of overtly authoritarian regimes in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, arguing that the democratisation of elite groups in authoritarian contexts can trigger wider social and political changes. Equally significantly, early adopters of the technology often set its future direction: for Megenta, they have an

interpretative role in the evolution of that media technology. In Tunisia, for example, well before the events of the Arab Spring the earliest users of web-based media were often liberals with anti-authoritarian views: it becomes, therefore, a subversive medium.

In Ukraine and Georgia, despite very different economic and cultural contexts, a similar pattern emerges. Anti-government protests in Georgia during 2011 were covered at length on the *Netgazeti* site, and *Ukrainska Pravda* is well-known for its independent stance and scepticism towards political elites. Coverage on both sites often contrasts with the silence of the mainstream press: there is, in other words, an increasing tendency for these online 'hub' websites to simply sidestep the mainstream press. There is no 'source cycle', merely a coalescing of interested and engaged readers around trusted online sources.

Vitaly, Ukraine: "There's definitely a correlation between the overall political situation in Ukraine and the audience's interest in web-based news. There is a zeitgeist. Google summaries prove this. Most users are just interested in, er, you know...celebrity news and gossip but at number 10 in the list of search terms in Ukraine is still Tymoshenko [jailed former Prime Minister], even though the issue has gone away from the mainstream. Maybe 10% of Ukrainian web users are engaged in political issues most of the time."

Geniets (2011) considers the specifics of this access argument, which is frequently cited by those cynical about the democratising potential of new media. She argues we are witnessing the rise of a global elite and in many countries 'cosmopolitans do not consume the same information about the world as their fellow citizens' (Geniets, 2011: 74). Similarly, Megenta (2011) argues that although overtly authoritarian regimes like that of Ethiopia censor the web, its cyberspace is highly subversive because those who have access are generally anti-government. In the context of Ukraine and Georgia a small number of influential blogs have the majority of inward links, giving early adopters enormous power to further interpret and reinterpret journalistic use of the web.

Maksym, Ukraine: 'Online websites are in very interesting position. Any bad news about the Ukrainian authorities is very popular, er, news spreads fast. And it is going local, or maybe even hyperlocal. There are two or three local news sites at present but I think the future will be local. Ukrainian online journalism is mainly copycat journalism apart from *Ukrainska Pravda*, whereas local news can generate real news and interest.'

Megenta (2011) notes that the relationship between bloggers and the mainstream media in African authoritarian countries is much less fractious, both rhetorically and in practice, than in the West. Bloggers both directly and indirectly influence the agenda of mainstream media outlets and they also function as agenda-testing grounds for journalists. Roberts (2011) argues that, in some deficient media contexts, distinctive small-scale 'source cycles' are emerging, which implicitly recognise the failure of the traditional mainstream press and set about developing an alternative. This recognition of deficiency, and the deliberate attempt to address it, is crucial. Indeed, Atton and Hamilton (2011) define the concept of 'alternative journalism' as being informed by a critique of existing ways of doing journalism. It proceeds both from dissatisfaction with the mainstream coverage of topics but also with the epistemology of news, emphasizing, for instance, alternative sourcing routines and the subordinate role of audience as receiver.

Such an approach means that online journalism finds itself able to set a wider media agenda, with far-reaching implications. Messner and DiStasto (2008) argue that newspapers are increasingly legitimizing blogs as credible sources, identifying a mutually beneficial 'source cycle' between the two in their US-based research. In this model, blogs rely heavily on traditional media as sources, while the mainstream press is increasingly inclined to legitimize blogs as credible sources of information, particularly in the political realm. As it applies to US journalism, it is perhaps inevitable that this model suggests that, although blogs can 'create a buzz' around issues, this only reaches a limited public until it is then re-sourced by the traditional media.



In smaller scale and/or structurally deficient media environments, like Ukraine and Georgia, these relationships are less skewed in favour of the mainstream press. Indeed, until the Arab Spring, a somewhat parochial anglocentrism characterized debate about the democratizing potential of new media, which had the inevitable effect of underestimating that potential. Even in the post-Arab Spring context, this parochialism means that interpretations of the role of new media tend to be unhelpfully narrow in scope. Comparative approaches argue, in contrast, that the most valid and substantive way to assess the impact and reach of political blogs is to consider their relationship with the mainstream news agenda. This paper contends that smaller scale media contexts offer some unique opportunities for online journalism to gain traction by impacting on, and enriching, the wider public sphere. Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun and Jeong (2009) argue that the impact of blogs is enhanced by anchoring their discussions to the stream of information, opinion and analysis produced by traditional media. Similarly, Drezner and Farrell (2004) argue that if a critical number of high-profile blogs raise a particular story, it can attract the interest of mainstream media outlets. If the mainstream media therefore address and frame critical issues, which political actors feel obliged to address, independent online journalism can perhaps construct focal points through which the mainstream media choose to operate. A significant critical mass needs to develop around blogs of this kind if they are to succeed in attracting the attention of the mainstream media, however. The obvious corollary to this is: to what extent can participatory media drive civic engagement? The figures are not encouraging but, as Megenta argues, such active participants are always likely to be in the minority. What matters is for new and diverse voices to join the debate and help provide a catalyst for others.

Ruslan, Ukraine: 'When the Tymoshenko issue happened there was some discussion on TV but all that is censored so people double check information online. I think they...more rely on the web. They trust it more because there's a variety of opinions, um...there's always people for and against. People are a little bit tired of the way TV reports because often they show one-sided arguments. Even people who are not active, who say they're not interested,

suddenly get interested in something like the Tymoshenko case. People get clips from the web, you know...they, er, find things out. Web users ridiculed Yanukovych when a wreath blew into his face during a sombre ceremony. The creativity of users brings irony into political discussion and this, um, is an important...a vital point. I believe that it's humour that makes the web powerful in Ukraine, because with TV and the press satire is just not a developed genre here. Satirical creativity...that's what I mean and the, er, web lets people communicate with each other. They're not under time pressure...they don't have particular objectives, unlike professionals.'

The importance of political satire in the 'new' context of online journalism, and its potential to engage the audience was further developed by another Ukrainian participant.

Yevhen, Ukraine: 'Satire has hugely contributed to the success of online in Ukraine. Social media is full of satirical treatments. It's just a pity that some people who don't use social media are cut out of the loop. You must have heard of the mobile phone footage of the Yanokovych 'wreath incident' [the wind blew a ceremonial wreath towards the Prime Minister's face at a commemorative service]. In half an hour it went viral despite his attempts to 'manage the crisis' by deleting footage. The PM is, I would say, dyslexic in terms of expressing his ideas and people have fun exploiting that online. Journalists in traditional media wouldn't be able to do this. Here the government is not playing the same game as it is in Russia. Here they don't understand how powerful the web is. Either you use it for its own sake or you try to control it.'

In journalistic terms, the immediacy of interactive debate, the 'cultural terrain of cyberspace', has several distinct technology-derived advantages over the mainstream press. Not least of these is the potential to capture the features of dialogue more robustly than print and the potential to collapse spatial boundaries, as well as engaging readers via satire and other popular forms of journalism and reportage. While this may be a less notable benefit in the Anglosphere, in environments like Ukraine and Georgia web-based journalism

allows for alternative perspectives to make a considerable impact and gain a considerable audience. Further to this, Lasica (2003) highlights the dynamism of web-based interactivity. When journalism becomes a process, not a static product, audiences discard their traditional role as passive consumers of news and become empowered partners with a shared stake in the end result. Blogs are the most powerful and accessible current tool for user-generated content, and illustrate most clearly the changing nature of the relationship between producers and consumers of news. As Sambrook (2006) and others argue, the appeal of blogging as a counterpoint to mainstream reporting is readily apparent, especially when set against the current tendencies towards homogeneity and standardisation which increasingly characterise market-driven journalism.

Vitaly, Ukraine: 'New media is becoming our key priority – we teach journalists how to use new media technologies. New voices are being raised in Ukraine, who also know that the web may bring profits. It's true that for many new media is just a hobby but they want to be professionals. I, er, think I'd go so far as to say we have a developing community of media innovators. Their motivation isn't primarily to report independently but rather, um, a chance to work as journalists. They may be critical and will share information that shows government weakness. Bear in mind too that web access here is a lot cheaper here than it is in the Baltic states, say. Access is easy to obtain. Critical mass has already been reached among young but it's also high with the middle aged.'

Yevhen, Ukraine: 'More and more people consider online news their main source of media, you know, we didn't have an enormous culture of print media, so a...niche was open. In the vacuum of independent Ukraine no quality newspapers emerged. We only had local newspapers or tabloid style newspapers. Magazines are a huge market, yes, but it was, er, new media that really filled the gap.'

Nino R, Georgia: 'I'd have to say that, already in certain communities online news is the only news they have. Someone already mentioned minorities,

well that is a good example – although of course these people are often accessing websites from outside Georgia. I don't know the numbers but many people just don't watch TV, especially the news, and they don't read newspapers...but they are very informed. Social networks like Facebook are definitely being used to, erm, counteract problems in mainstream press. And I think we are using these sites more and more for social reasons than private. People choose friends based on who has the most and best information, who are the news givers.'

Nana, Georgia: "I think in terms of online journalism this year is also important for a second reason, which is a big US aid grant to assist Georgian media. They have a huge emphasis, a huge aim, to assist online new media development so there will be some big scale grants given to local and regional media outlets to develop online media channels. So I think this will change the media landscape here."

The participants all had a tendency to swap terms when referring to the democratizing potential of online journalism. This is significant as there is a considerable, and growing, issue regarding the definition of terms in the area of new media and online journalism. In particular, when attempting to make an assessment of the potential for online journalism to promote meaningful political change, precise definitions are of fundamental importance. Lievrouw (2011) argues that 'new media' has become something of a cultural 'placeholder'. People often use it without having a clear idea of what it means, partly because the boundaries of new media are often uncertain. More recently, the use of social media and other online forms during the Arab Spring encapsulated the importance of the 'network' as a means of countering the traditional dominance of political elites in environments where those elites see the media as something to be 'controlled'. As such, much of this sort of online journalism could be considered alternative or activist.

David, Georgia: "We all use Facebook to discuss issues and ideas. There are over 600,000 users in Georgia. Interestingly our neighbours Armenia tried to mirror the Arab Spring and organize some kind of Facebook Revolution. It

didn't really work but it says something about the potential for online activism of this kind in the [Caucasus] region. Look, when the mainstream can't provide you with reliable or meaningful information you search for substitutions. There is a need for different perspectives.'

Lievrouw (2011) attempts to define alternative and activist new media as employing or modifying the communication practices and social arrangements of new information technologies to challenge or alter dominant, accepted ways of reporting and engaging in society, culture and politics. The networked nature of new media allows creators, via the ubiquity and interactivity it offers users, to create projects in which people share information, extend networks and contacts, and critique or intervene in prevailing social, cultural, economic and political conditions. New media of this kind does not only reflect or critique mainstream media and culture, they constitute and intervene in them. Much of this echoes the more recent views of Mason who argues that the events of the Arab Spring demonstrate conclusively the power of the network and its ability to defeat or challenge political elites (Mason, 2012, Lievrow, 2011).

Yevhen, Ukraine: 'Last week a file service was closed down in Ukraine. Officially we were told this was because of piracy but next day 100,000 people organised to attack government websites and closed them down. This was all organised by social networks and publicised by *Ukrainska Pravda*. The government were paralysed in web terms but they were particularly upset because they couldn't control the situation...and they eventually reinstated the pirate service. But, you know what, it's a pyrrhic victory for us, because the government may try to devote more effort now to control the web, more like they do in Russia. This could be really dangerous at some point in the near future and could bring tighter controls over the web in general.'

Ruslan, Ukraine: 'Now, for all public campaigns the best way is to use social networks. We realise that if we're united we can send a message to government. The Tymoshenko debate took place mostly online, and I'm not sure this was appreciated internationally. But Twitter is still a weak instrument here... Facebook is the number one place to consume news. And I should

add that the Pravda news site helps coordinate it all, or at least publicises what's going on, makes it...central.'

Participatory journalism such as that referenced by the interviewees seeks to critique and reform the press by involving 'amateur' reporters in the practice of journalism. It becomes an interactive process, adopts the forms of professional journalism but with the purpose of transforming the press as an institution. It provides new arenas for news opinion and analysis that is marginalised by the mainstream. Newman's (2009) study of how UK and US mainstream media is responding to the wave of participatory social media and the historic shift in control towards individual consumers, argues that social media, blogs and user-generated content are not replacing journalism, but are creating an important extra layer of information and diverse opinion. Most people are still happy to rely on mainstream news organisations to sort fact from fiction and serve up a filtered view, but they are increasingly engaged by this information, particularly when recommended by friends or another trusted source. He concludes that there is a new confidence in the underlying values of journalism and the role that social media might play in keeping those values relevant in the digital age.

However, it could again be argued that such conclusions are narrowly anglocentric in focus. This study, instead, suggests that in some dysfunctional media environments, where the mainstream media cannot or will not 'serve up a filtered view' of this interactivity and participation, there is a coalescing around what might be called 'hub' websites: independent political websites which deliberately position themselves as an alternative to mainstream journalism but do this via a rather traditional, objective approach: the kind of journalism fetishized as the Western ideal. We know that the net allows diverse groups to coordinate and organise protests in a very short time. But there are more significant political developments in Ukraine and Georgia, whereby a particular, professionally produced but independent site deliberately addresses mainstream deficiencies by providing a focal point for the discontented and a 'filtered', often edited, source of social media.

Tetyana, Ukraine: 'The recent tax protests in Kiev were interesting. It was the first genuine protest since the Orange Revolution in my view. Basically, small businesses were protesting over tax, just ordinary people. They, erm, debated the issues online then gathered in Maydan [Kiev's main square]. In fact it spilled over from online to offline. Mainstream media was so reluctant to cover it that people had to go online to cover it...to read about it even. These aren't people who know how to use Facebook and Twitter, they're market traders. Instead they used simple online forums. The protests went on for a whole day before TV channels mentioned it. New media pushed the mainstream media to cover it. Someone took webcam footage and published it online. It was almost as if we all participated. Then even the international media covered it before the Ukrainian media. Our media was waiting, waiting to cover it. Suddenly you see a live community gathering online and, bang, we all know about it. No-one trusts the [mainstream] media so we look for comments from the, er...guy next door. There's always the question whether these professional journalists have some kind of agenda. This is why *Ukrainska Pravda* is a key source of news and information. It collates this stuff, it's reliable and it puts it all into some kind of journalistic focus.'

'I follow bloggers who are not journalists. The big difference between Ukraine and Russia is that we don't have blogging 'faces'. There are so many bloggers, loads of bloggers, but no 'faces'. I always come across new bloggers – they don't have ties between them, no aggregation. It's almost like we're walking round in the dark and then you suddenly stumble across something. I think that's a big reason for the success...the...value, of a more professional site like *Ukrainska Pravda*.'

This participant highlighted differences between Ukraine and Russia. The contextual presence of Russia is obviously critical when discussing Ukrainian and Georgian politics. Vladimir Putin has spent much time and energy attempting to recreate a sphere of influence in the Caucasus and parts of Eastern Europe. Although formally a democracy, Russia has well-documented strong authoritarian tendencies under his leadership (Garton Ash, 2004). However, Russia's internet space, Runet is virtually free of censorship or

government control and, unlike China, Russia has not created an internet framework it can easily control. Indeed, the BBC covered Russian opposition use of the *LiveJournal* blogging platform in March 2012 (BBC, 2012). The changing media landscape in Russia is crucial in explaining the growth of opposition sentiment in the country. Since 2007 the number of Russian Internet users has jumped from 23 to 53 million; more than 13 million use Facebook and the old media are now easily bypassed (The Week, 2012). Fossato and Lloyd (2008), however, argue that Russian online networks are often 'closed and intolerant' with web users unresponsive to political campaigning online. The context of Russia is crucial for Ukraine and Georgia, as elements in both countries frequently define themselves in opposition to it. This study suggests that 'large-scale' media environments like those of Russia, China and the 'Anglosphere' limit the impact of online political journalism, but that in other contexts and cultures, with smaller-scale media environments, web-based journalism remains a serious, and sometimes lone, challenge to the failings of the mainstream press. And, further, that 'hub' websites provide a focus for interested parties. That said, financing online political journalism of this nature is likely to remain a challenge.

Katarina, Georgia: "The journal *Liberali*, especially the web version, and the purely online *Netgazeti*, are good examples of the kind of publication that advertisers stay away from in Georgia. They do this because of the content...it's truthful, real journalism. But they struggle, you know, financially. The main source of income for both are grants provided by international NGOs for the development of independent media. Income from this is tiny though,'

**3. How are minorities covered in the media?** This question was again posed in some cases alongside a follow-up question, which was pursued where relevant:

**3b. What role does online journalism have in the portrayal of minority linguistic and ethnic groups?**



The final question revolved around a consideration of the representation of minority linguistic and ethnic groups within both countries. The post-Soviet context is crucial here. Nationalism was supposedly made redundant under the Soviet system, which was intended to be a free association of many different peoples with Communism fundamentally global in scope. The rationale for including this question was twofold: firstly, independence in the post-Soviet era rendered such 'redundant' issues pertinent and raised the question of how to negotiate the new paradigm in media terms. Further, it could be argued that the representation of minority groups acts as a kind of litmus test for a free press, in the sense that societies typically move from seeing internal minorities as a threat towards a celebration, or at least tolerance, of diversity.

Clearly, the cultural contexts vary considerably here. Georgia is a classic Caucasian 'melting pot' of linguistic groups and ethnicities, whereas Ukraine is considerably more monoethnic. However, discussion was allowed to evolve with the obvious result that the debate among Ukrainian journalists revolved around the portrayal (and in some cases media-driven political exploitation) of the east-west split in the country, between a Europe-facing Ukrainian-speaking West, and a Russian-speaking, Russian-facing East. All questions were underpinned by a consideration of the current and potential future role of online journalism in this area: both in terms of the representation of minority groups and in terms of hyperlocal news provision that represents and articulates their perspectives and concerns.

Because of its ethnic and linguistic diversity, these issues are particularly pertinent in Georgia, where one of the key issues in terms of Georgian media freedom is the representation of minorities, which represent 16.2% of the population according to the Georgian Census of 2002 (Yerevan Press Club, 2011). The largest minority communities are Azeri and Armenian, followed by Russians, Abkhazs, Assyrians, Greeks, Jews, Chechens, Kurds, Ossetians and Ukrainians. After the Rose Revolution, the Georgian government implemented several reforms aimed at promoting minority rights, yet there remain criticisms that the government has failed to manage pluralism

constructively (Minority Rights Group International, 2009). Article 24(1) of the Georgian constitution guarantees the right to freely receive or impart information, but minority communities often face difficulties accessing information in the Georgian media because of the language barrier. The public broadcaster is legally bound 'to reflect in its programmes ethnic, cultural, linguistic, religious, age and gender diversity of the society and to broadcast programmes in minority languages in proportion' according to Article 16 of Georgia's Law of Broadcasting (2003). But while it does air some programmes, there is only (for instance) one weekly 20-minute news programme in Russian, and the range of print media in minority languages is even more limited.

The Georgian journalists interviewed argued that there are few ethical standards when it comes to reporting of minorities.

Sofia, Georgia: 'I would have to say that coverage [of minorities] is either very limited in scope, or, quite often, focused on what you might call 'criminal issues'. This might involve, er, emphasising a criminal's ethnic or...even, er...linguistic group, in the coverage.'

A survey by the NGO United Nations Association of Georgia found that the ethnicity of criminals or suspects is regularly emphasised when they are not of Georgian descent (Minority Rights Group International, 2009). Again, this runs counter to the Georgian broadcasting code.

David, Georgia: "Here's what I see as the big issue. If minorities have to rely on their own [foreign] news sources for information, political or otherwise, this is going to make them feel even more isolated within the Georgian state, surely?"

However, despite these barriers, linguistic minorities in Georgia do use the media to develop and discuss political issues.

Nino M, Georgia: 'From time to time, they start up their own newspapers. Russians, for example. But their readership is very low...they are, erm, they're just not encouraged to develop them. There isn't a lot of demand for having a separate (Russian) media as there are still those...associations with Soviet days, but at the same time there are also programmes broadcast in local minority languages. The public broadcaster has some responsibility in this area and does broadcast occasional programmes in Armenian, for example, but commercial channels don't even consider it.'

David, Georgia: 'Also the big problem you can see in every field is the lack of, erm, self-governance. For example in regions where Azeri speakers dominate they would, or...should attempt to have their own media, to organise themselves to have something of their own, something that, um, speaks to them...but this almost never happens because of social, economic issues. There's just not enough money for it and most people don't have the information how to...how to do it. There's an obvious role for the web here I think. It would be cheaper and easier to get something web-based off the ground but access rates are very low at the moment. In these regions many people haven't got web access.'

The range of Georgian print media available in minority languages is very limited. Although there is little community private funding available, however, there is some governmental financial support provided to *Vrastan*, an Armenian language newspaper, and *Svobodnia Gruzia*, a Russian language newspaper. However, the latter title focuses largely on entertainment at the expense of politics (Minority Rights Group International, 2009).

Nino R, Georgia: 'The government doesn't encourage it either because there is always a threat from ethnic TV because of problems of integration. For example, in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, in area populated mostly by Armenians it's a very, very touchy issue. After the August 2008 war, this region was almost painted by the Georgian media as the next separatist region of Georgia, with Armenians depicted as Russia's natural allies. They tried to organise the people along language lines and it's a very aggressive

campaign. For example they have, erm...numbers...quotas in higher education for Georgian-speakers who come from Samtskhe-Javakheti. There are two problems: a lack of self governance and a lack of encouragement from the government to strengthen ethnic minority language and culture within the country.'

There are localized solution to some of these issues, and there have been attempts to use hyperlocal news media, some of it web-based, to articulate the concerns and perspectives of minority ethnic communities within Georgia.

Nana, Georgia: "There were two cases in Ninotsminda [where Armenians represent 96% of the population] and [the wider region of] Javakheti (94%), that are populated by ethnic minorities. There were attempts to have community radio stations - this was a huge project financed by BBC world trust service in 2006. Two years of the project went by just trying to gain a license, because the regulatory body just refused to grant the license and they were waiting for a response. The only thing they could do was place loudspeakers in the parks, where people would gather to hear news in their own language because they didn't have a license. Then the project was closed down completely."

Gorda, Georgia: 'Also, you've got to remember that most of these people are not fluent in Georgian, There's a real, um...democratic deficit here. The Russian speaking community here is very large: Armenians and Azeris generally speak it too, I mean they speak Russian too, but they have may have problems following Russian news, which isn't aimed at them anyway, so they are doubly marginalized and feel more connected with Armenian and Azeri issues.'

Nana, Georgia: 'There is also another really notable development here. There's a newly financed Russian language channel, with a strong web presence, which you would think would serve the Russian community in Georgia but in reality this channel is directed to north Caucasus and beyond to feed them good news from Georgia, how good Georgia is, you know. You

don't see Russian-speaking Georgians represented on this channel...their problems, er, how they live. Their interest is just in the Georgian government, how it tackles corruption....it's basically an attempt to convey a positive message about Georgia.'

This refers to the PIK channel, accused of provocation by the Russians. Director General Robert Parsons said at the time: "It's not our intention to antagonize Moscow. But of course if you have a monopoly over information and somebody arrives on the scene and breaks your monopoly, you're going to find it irritating. And it's our intention to break the Russian government's monopoly over news. We make no secret of that," Foreign Ministry Deputy Minister Tornike Gordadze sees PIK as part of a larger Georgian policy to reach out to neighbouring groups in Russia. "Georgia has to promote its positive image to the North Caucasus to avoid another problem like this, if one day Russia wants to reinvade Georgia, the North Caucasians who are used in the adventure would think twice before following Russia." (BBC, 2011)

In the Ukrainian interviews, this initial leading question led in a different direction from the outset with most interviewees focusing representations of the East/West split in the country. The ethnic make-up of Ukraine is very different. In contrast to the South Caucasian ethnic and linguistic diversity exemplified by Georgia, the main cultural and linguistic divide is between Russian-speaking east and 'European', Ukrainian-speaking west.

Maksym, Ukraine: 'Let's talk about the *Ukrainska Pravda* website again here. Pravda is pan-Ukrainian but... maybe...let's say it would appeal in Lviv [in the Western Ukrainian heartland] more than Donetsk [in the industrial Russian-speaking east]. I lived in Donetsk for two years and can say that people from Donetsk need, ah, what you might call...different news...they're interested in different things. It is still more individualistic in the west, more collective in the east...where, er, er, they are...more likely to believe what they're told, shall we say. In the mid 90s there were no journalists in the east, just localised versions of Russian newspapers. In western Ukraine we have lots of journalists who are popular personalities but journalists are not themselves

opinion formers. In the east you do get articles which are anti-Ukrainian, no question, but I would say the west is not anti-Russian except Svoboda [the Ukrainian nationalist party] and even they are not anti-Eastern Ukraine. The Russian media thinks Lviv is an anti-Russian centre but this surprises people in Lviv.'

Others, however, felt this split was overemphasised and even took exception to such generalisations, again relating them to what they saw as reductive media portrayals and, notably and without prompting, suggesting that online journalism has a role to play in narrowing the gap between East and West Ukraine.

Vitaly, Ukraine: 'The divisions in Ukraine are much less noticeable online. In TV debates, some issues are sensitive – language, relations with Russia, the east/west split. But recently I'd say more people consider these issues less important than standards of living and the overall direction Ukraine moves in. There are lots of critical websites in Donetsk, for instance, which show problems in local politics. In fact I'd say eastern Ukraine has more powerful individual bloggers. People see them as an alternative source of information. There are one or two major Donetsk blogs that I know cover crucial issues and news. This east/west gap is much less noticeable online and [has diminished] in the last two years.'

This participant, along with some others, strongly refuted what he felt was a politically-inspired attempt to over-emphasise the divisions in Ukrainian society and particularly the 'division' between Russian east and Ukrainian west. Notably, this respondent and others felt that the reductive media coverage of this issue, and acceptance of the current Ukrainian regime's political 'line' on the subject, was a problem in both domestic and foreign media.

Vitaly, Ukraine: 'Many voices across Ukraine are critical of the government online. But TV never shows voices from Donetsk [Eastern, Russian-speaking Ukraine] criticising the government. TV is interested in showing a divided

country, whereas the Internet, the web world, hates this attempt to divide. I'd say TV is just infotainment in Ukraine, an illusion of democracy, er....even a kind of manipulation. It seems to be a place of discussion and open debate but there are two main problems. First, you have to make a distinction between real political opposition and opposition funded by government. Why is the opposition funded by the government? Because, um, because the government wants radical opposition like Ukrainian nationalists to deepen the gap between regions and cement its own power base in the industrial east'.

Ukrainian nationalists like Svoboda were making some political headway at the time of the interviews. Seen as imposing values not appealing to eastern Ukraine, several participants mentioned its 'convenience' for the ruling party, which has its powerbase in the Russian-speaking East.

Yevhen, Ukraine: 'There is no East/West split – it's created by journalists. People can read either language. It's a question of quality. If there was a great idea in journalistic terms that would be popular – it doesn't matter what language or area it's aimed at.'

Tetyana, Ukraine: 'My parents don't buy papers any more. If a website wanted to find a broader audience, bridge the regional divide, we would share loads of values. I definitely think that the east/west differences are overplayed. We're all interested in healthcare for instance. If someone wanted to find common ground they could. And we could, probably...distance ourselves from the nationalist dimension. The debate just isn't happening – our national TV just has big entertainment shows. Svoboda is convenient for the ruling party – it diverts attention away from the immediate issues. It only comes up in local and regional news. Svoboda re-emphasises the...er, rhetoric of the east/west divide. We should try to unite the country around civic values. I sympathise with some of what Svoboda says but it is distracting.'

M, Ukraine: 'The west characterises the issues, if they do it at all, badly. It's not about the east/west split...actually all politicians are basically pro-European. It's not really possible to be a pro-Russian politician. All this is a

smokescreen for the main reason they're in parliament...to steal money. There's no ideological reason at all. And when it comes to covering all this in the media it's hard, especially for those of us working in print. Lots of people still see journalism as activism.'

This participant took a more critical line than most of the other respondents, but the clear balance of opinion among the Ukrainian journalists suggested that online journalism had an increasing tendency to question what they saw as politically-inspired attempts to emphasise the fault lines in Ukrainian culture and society. Similarly, whilst acknowledging the inevitable resource issues, the Georgian journalists all emphasised the real or potential role that online journalism had in articulating the perspectives of minority linguistic and ethnic groups within the country.

#### Conclusion: The democratizing potential of independent 'hub' websites

The evolution of what might be called the 'Anglocentric' analysis of the democratizing potential of online media has gone through several distinct phases. Discussion initially revolved around whether new media could be trusted, and then evolved to consider whether new media threatened journalistic professionalism. It gradually moved on to considerations of whether it would destroy the mainstream press. Then came a gradual acceptance that blogs were simply an adjunct to the mainstream press, adding diversity but lacking real impact. However, this article argues that such debates are more relevant in the Anglosphere and that the role of online journalism in its broadest sense is potentially highly politically significant in more obviously deficient media environments. Further, it suggests and perhaps goes some way towards demonstrating that the clearest indication of this significance is currently seen in the 'semi-free' journalistic environments of 'west facing' parts of the former Soviet Union, particularly those countries like Georgia and Ukraine that experienced 'colour revolutions' almost a decade ago, where demands for a free press played a central role and continue to underpin political debate.



In these environments, there are signs of a coalescing around what could be described as 'hub' websites. It is worth stressing again that such sites are not blogs: they echo but transcend the blogging format. They are, rather, independently funded sources of online political journalism that have identified and *deliberately address* shortcomings in the mainstream news media. Websites such as *Netgazeti* and *Liberali* in Georgia, and *Ukrainska Pravda* in Ukraine, are a genuinely alternative media response to topical political issues and echo similar examples in entirely different media contexts (for instance, *WalesHome*, which addresses a structurally deficient media environment in post-devolution Wales, and *Nawaat.org* which functions as a post-'Arab Spring' hub for Tunisian political journalism). They are all deliberate and overtly journalistic attempts to circumvent the mainstream press and often do the job of conveying political information more effectively than conventional journalism in these environments. Further, they act as a filtering system for the mass of information deriving from social media like Twitter and Facebook, as well as conveying and collating the perspectives of individual bloggers. They have, in other words, assumed an editorial or gatekeeping role, channelling online opinion through professional journalistic techniques. Beckett (2008) argues that the distinction between weblogs and traditional media is becoming increasingly blurred as journalism goes online, while Roberts (2010) suggests that, in many different contexts, an advanced, hybrid form of 'web-based journalism' is developing, a form that begins to set a wider media agenda. Beckett (2008) suggests that, instead of the old polarity, it is more useful to think in terms of Personal Bloggers and Journalist Bloggers who are both effectively 'networked journalists'. Numbers accessing these 'hub' sites may be relatively low, but in small-scale media environments their influence on the mainstream and on the wider political agenda is magnified, and, echoing Megenta (2011) in the context of authoritarian African regimes, the numbers are not necessarily the most relevant issue. Rather, it is a question of influence, of who and what those engaged readers represent.

Hanitzsch et al (2011) found several similarities between contemporary journalistic cultures in varied contexts worldwide, in particular the global primacy of role perceptions that are characterized by detachment and non-

involvement. Acting as government watchdog also seemed a universal aspiration, alongside a consensus regarding the adherence to universal principles to be followed regardless of context. The triangular relationship between the state, the citizen and the public sphere remains at the heart of all such debates about the value and role of journalism. Habermas's contested views on the public sphere arguably remain core to media theory and inevitably remain relevant in the context of the 'Arab Spring' – notwithstanding the cautionary writings of Schudson (2008) who points out that journalism has long existed outside democracy and that journalism does not by itself produce or provide democracy. Indeed, several writers are critical of the tendency to cite Habermas' notion of the public sphere without reference to the contextual specificity: the emerging middle class in C17/18 Western Europe (Louw, 2010, for instance). It remains a useful shorthand, however, as, in most idealistic interpretations part of journalism's purpose is to encourage civic participation, improve public debate and enhance public life without sacrificing the independence of a free press. For Habermas (1989), that brief moment in time represented a period when political action was driven by 'authentic public opinion' as opposed to manufactured and/or manipulated public opinion.

The words of Ruslan, one of the Ukrainian interviews, seem pertinent in this context, as he articulates the pseudo-Habermasian idealism inherent in the kind of hyperlocal web-based journalism now gaining a foothold in parts of provincial Ukraine. 'Traditional papers are not doing well in Ukrainian regions – even in small cities people are moving to the web for news. Print media tend to be oblast owned, same as they were in the Soviet era, with small print runs. So the pan-Ukrainian sites like *Pravda* take over as a news source. But it's not just that: there are also successful local examples – in Sumi an interesting project substitutes existing old media with a news website. Journalists everywhere are doing hyperlocal political journalism. Local (mainstream) journalists used to write about the local Communist party so they still think this is what their audience wants. There's no tradition to write about real local issues. Journalists talk about local politicians at the expense of, say, potholes in the road. People are tired of political talkshows, disappointed in traditional media and its capacity to explain world around them. It's detached from reality

hence the popularity of social networks and hence the popularity and importance of *Ukrainska Pravda*. Online, journalists can write and say what they think and write things they can't do in their [mainstream] articles.'

Despite the optimism inherent in such comments, cynicism about web-based journalism remains, and much of it is well founded. In the contexts outlined above, however, it could be argued that such criticisms are less pertinent, partly because many political blogs directly address concerns about the mainstream media and therefore position themselves differently at the outset. While political blogs and online 'hubs' are certainly not immune from self-referential naval gazing and are often highly partisan, free as they are from legislative and editorial constraints, this paper argues that the best examples are a valuable addition to the news media. This is particularly true if we consider online political journalism in its broadest sense, in which some sites specifically intend to provide a space for the kind of debate that is lacking in the mainstream press and therefore deliberately place more emphasis on objectivity, analysis and interactivity. There is a sense, increasingly frequently justified, that this could represent a form of 'solution' to the 'problem' represented by the shortcomings of the mainstream press.

For optimists, the democratic potential of the web can be genuinely harnessed by these forms, which may not herald the end of the mainstream news monopoly on information, but can at least enrich the public sphere. Globally, there are much earlier precedents for the notion of countering perceived deficiencies in the mainstream media by attempting to exploit the interactivity offered by web-based technology. Arguably the most famous was the 1999 launch of OhMyNews in South Korea with the tagline: 'Every citizen is a journalist'. Founder Oh Yeon-Ho expressed his frustration with the 'haughty attitude common in the Korean media' by involving more than 700 'citizen reporters' in his attempt to circumvent the mainstream Korean press and supply news from their own perspectives. That number grew to 32,000 within four years and the project continues to attract global attention for what Oh calls a 'revolution in the culture of news production and consumption' (Oh, 2009).

Further, some of the traditional scepticism about blogging and online journalism in the academic and journalistic communities is beginning to be questioned by those with a different perspective on these issues. These criticisms are worthy of note, as they question the validity of academic caution in relation to the rapid evolution of the online environment. *The Guardian's* web editor Emily Bell, for instance, ended a recent review with the following critique of research into online journalism. 'Unlinked and frozen in time, its weighty discourse is undermined by its immutable nature. Some of the bigger themes of normative news agendas and democratic purpose are truly worthy of expansion, while some of the more micro observations about journalism and politics already seem dated and dispensable.' (Bell, 2010). In the context of media and political environments like Ukraine and Georgia, such criticisms are highly pertinent, illustrating as they do the difficulty of applying cogent academic analysis to a rapidly evolving, highly politicised media milieu.

ENDS

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